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## THE ETHICAL TEACHING OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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THE purpose of the present discussion is to survey the field of Old Testament ethics, and to present some general considerations with reference to the ethical teaching. It is not the aim to consider concrete cases, except as they are related to the general considerations. Difficulties will not be considered merely as isolated facts, but with a view to the determination of some general principles concerning them. Considerable attention must necessarily be paid to the relation of Old Testament ethics to New Testament ethics ; but the comparison of Old Testament ethics with other ancient systems of ethics, as well as with the ethical discussions of the present day, will only be made incidentally.

While the present paper thus, to some extent, considers the Old Testament ethics as a system, it must be kept in mind that the ethical teaching of the Old Testament is in reality very unsystematic. This is due chiefly to the practical nature of the Old Testament ; the ethical teaching on different occasions was intended primarily to meet the needs of those particular times. It must also be remembered that the use of terms commonly employed in ethical discussions might easily give the impression that the Old Testament is more philosophical than is really the case. These terms are used here simply for convenience, for the sake of comparison, and do not ordinarily represent ideas formally presented in the Old Testament.

Of course, in an *exhaustive* discussion of Old Testament ethics the subject must be treated historically, with a consideration of the development within the Old Testament. This would involve a discussion of the dates of different parts of the Old Testament. The present discussion is by no means exhaustive, and so will only occasionally attempt to consider this development. This

is partly because of the necessity of the case if the paper is to be brief. It is also for the reason that the present writer regards such development as comparatively unimportant in a general consideration of the subject, because it is found chiefly in the details rather than in the broad outlines of the teaching.

Professor George H. Palmer<sup>1</sup> defines ethics as "a criticism of the formation, maintenance, and comparative worth of human customs." Better is the definition often given, "the science of human duty," because ethics considers, not customs generally, but only customs that are related to human duty, in the thought of men. It is evident that ethics must consider, not only duty, but what has been and is regarded as duty, whether rightly or wrongly. Ethics includes in its scope, therefore, whatever has a relation to human duty, although this relation may be purely subjective, and of course may therefore be incorrect. The adjective "ethical" in its strict meaning precisely corresponds to the noun "ethics;" it means "relating to ethics." Two other meanings of the word, however, are sufficiently common to be regarded as sanctioned by good usage, viz., "placing special emphasis upon ethics" and "in conformity with *right* ethics, ethically correct." These different meanings of the word "ethical" are often confused, and therefore special care is needed in order to keep them distinct.

A limitation of the above definition of ethics needs, however, to be given. It might seem that ethics should be used to include all human duty, toward God as well as toward man, including one's self. In general use, however, the former part is excluded; ethics has nothing to do with duty toward God, but only with human duty toward men, including one's self.

This raises the question of the relation of ethics and religion, or ethics and theology. Strictly ethics should be compared with theology, which is the science of religion, while morality should be compared with religion. But since religion is often used popularly as including the science, and in any case it covers the same sphere as theology, it may be as well here to speak, as is often done, of the relation between ethics and religion. In some

<sup>1</sup>*The Field of Ethics*, p. 212.

respects the two are distinct, although not without influence on each other. Thus it has been said above that duty to God is a part of religion, not of ethics. So also consideration of the nature of God and his relations to men belongs to religion, not to ethics. The religious motives are not included in ethics. In other respects they cover the same ground. Every religion includes some consideration of ethics; no religion has been known which has not treated of the relations of men to each other. Such consideration must belong to ethics by its very definition. Whatever relates to duty to men is included in ethics, not the less truly when the data are furnished by religion. It also belongs to religion, because historically it has been a part of it, and has been closely connected with the other parts of the particular religion concerned. Hence ethics may be a part of religion; "religion" is the more comprehensive term, including much that does not belong to ethics, while everything in ethics may be included in religion, or, more strictly, in theology.

It is also true that ethics may be entirely separate from religion. The Greek philosophers, and many since that day, especially in modern times, have discussed systems of ethics which had no direct reference to religion.

In connection with what has been said above allusion should be made to the use of the term "ethical" as applied to the religions of the world. In the strict sense of the word, every religion should be called "ethical," because it contains some consideration of duty to men. But often religions are divided into *ethical* and *natural*, in which case another meaning of the word "ethical" is in mind. This sometimes means that the religions so described are ethically correct; more often it means that they give special prominence to ethics, while those described as *natural* give relatively little prominence to it.

The relation of ethics to morality has been implied in a statement already made. Ethics is the science, morality the art. The morality of the Old Testament, therefore, while closely connected with our subject, is by no means identical with it, and will not be considered here. The practices of the Hebrew people belong to morality, not to ethics; they have no direct con-

nection with our subject, although they may at times give indirect information concerning the ethical teaching.

The data for our consideration, then, are chiefly the direct teachings of the Old Testament concerning ethics. They include, however, acts done by individuals by command of God.

The first general question should be: What is the basis of ethics recognized in the Old Testament, what is the ground of the distinction between right and wrong? Man is represented in the Old Testament as a free moral agent. This is regularly assumed rather than stated. The responsibility of man for his own acts is fully recognized. At the same time God's government of the world is often emphasized, his control of men and nations is often asserted. These two things are not expressly reconciled, yet God's sovereignty is never held to impair human responsibility. Sin, therefore, is not merely misfortune, as it often was considered in the Greek systems of ethics, but is a thing for which the doer is himself really responsible.

What is the real nature of sin in the Old Testament? Right is conformity to God's will and law, wrong or sin is lack of conformity to it, transgression of it. There is, then, this objective basis for right. Questions beyond this are hardly touched upon. Whether the law of God is arbitrary or is inherent in his very nature, and so in the nature of other things, is a matter hardly considered; yet it is evident that the latter is really the teaching. There is also to some extent an appeal to what may be called intuition, to the sense of right inherent in the human heart. But this is not in order to furnish truth concerning the right, but to attest it, the voice of God in the soul speaks responsive to the voice of God in his teachings. Duty is to do the commands of God. Here, of course, we are dealing with religion and with ethics as well.

This brings us to a consideration of the question which, in various forms of statement, is so prominent in ethical discussions: What is the goal of ethics in general, the moral ideal, the good, the greatest good? This question is not often formally stated or discussed in the Old Testament. Yet there can hardly be a doubt concerning its teaching. The good is in harmony

with the right, the greatest good is to do the will of God. How much this involves is not fully expressed, but it is indicated in its general outlines. The chief expression of this ethical ideal is national, it is the Hebrew nation as the kingdom of God, God-like, doing the will of God. Such is the teaching all through the Old Testament. It is the nation as a whole which is included in the oft-recurring command, which is both injunction and ideal, found, *e. g.*, in Lev. 19 : 2, "Ye shall be holy ; for I, Jehovah, your God, am holy." Such a holy nation appears often as the prominent future ideal in the utterances of the prophets.

Along with this national expression of the greatest good is also found the individual expression. In general, it is recognized that the nation is made up of individuals, and that the obligations and duties of the nation are those of individuals as well. This individual expression receives much greater emphasis in the latter part of the Old Testament, although it does not displace the national expression. The individual good is the same in kind as the national, the individual is to be like God. This individual goal is found stated in such passages as Prov. 9 : 10, "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom;" and in the conclusion of the book of Ecclesiastes, Eccl. 12 : 13, "This is the end of the matter ; all hath been heard : fear God, and keep his commandments ; for this is the whole duty of man."

A further statement may, however, be made. The Old Testament states that man is made in the image of God. This and similar statements show that man in his real nature is similar to God. Hence it is easily to be inferred that man is acting according to his true nature in doing the will of God. Another statement of the ideal would therefore be that it is the full and perfect development of man's true nature. The ideal would thus be the same as that recognized by one class of modern writers, of which ideal President Harris<sup>2</sup> says : "Various terms are employed to designate this good : worth, perfection, value, dignity, self-realization, character, satisfaction." In the Old Testament, however, this good is looked upon as something not to be

<sup>2</sup> *Moral Evolution*, p. 65.

studied chiefly from its lower side, the nature of man, but from its higher side, the will of God.

The national and individual statements of the goal are not regarded as conflicting, but harmonious. Hence they do not touch the question as to the relation between egoism and altruism in modern statements of the greatest good. Very little indeed is said upon this question in the Old Testament. But both views are evidently regarded as having a measure of truth, as in many modern ethical discussions. This is seen in the fact that the Old Testament puts special emphasis on justice, which means that the individual and the fellow-man are considered equally; they are ethically on an equality. This is insisted on both generally and specifically. It is the characteristic of the regulations concerning punishment, such as: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." It appears explicitly in such statements as Lev. 19: 18: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." When the two do not coincide it is altruism that is recognized, so that in a comparatively few cases there is explicit teaching of altruism, as in Prov. 25: 21: "If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink."

What has already been said indicates that the Old Testament is opposed to the view known as hedonism—that happiness, individual or universal, is the greatest good. Yet it says much about happiness. This is really a secondary end, subordinate to the highest good, whether national or individual, yet normally accompanying it, regularly associated with it. The statements of President Harris<sup>3</sup> would fitly represent the Old Testament idea, "worth" being understood as "God-likeness":

The ideal may be regarded as consisting of worth and happiness, the happiness being consequent upon, or incident to, the worth attained. . . . They are together, like heat and light. . . . Man is so constituted that whatever promotes his right development promotes his happiness, and whatever hinders or disturbs his right development gives him discomfort, pain, or wretchedness.

A detailed study of the particular duties commanded is not possible or necessary here. It may be observed in general that

<sup>3</sup> *Moral Evolution*, p. 72.

the teachings place emphasis on the fundamentals ; that they are comprehensive ; that their omissions are really few. They recognize the whole round of human duties. Comparatively they have least to say about one's specific duties to one's self. These are not entirely omitted, however ; the admonitions against drunkenness, for example, seem plainly to recognize such duties. The rights of one's fellow-men to life and property are recognized, with inculcation of the appropriate duties. Veracity is insisted on, especially in connections in which lying would injure others. The duties to one's fellow-men are largely, but not entirely, limited by national bounds. This means that certain duties apply only to Hebrews ; in other cases duties to others are recognized, but they are not in every case the same as those owed to Hebrews.

What has already been said is sufficient to suggest the relation of Old Testament ethics to the ethics of the other religions of its own time. In general the ethical system of the Old Testament is immeasurably superior to these other systems. In reference to specific duties the other ancient religions are far below the Old Testament, both by reason of omissions and of a lower standard in the things that are commanded. Many immoral acts are commanded in them.

*[To be concluded in the next number.]*